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Strategies of Subversion of the Kadehine in the Early Islamic Republic of Mauritania (1960s–1970s)

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Abstract

We trace the formation of the Kadehine, a Mauritanian cultural and political movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a focus on aspects of the “political underground” central to the movement’s strategies and organizing principles. As an anthropological history of the Kadehine, we focus on the organizing perspective afforded by its sources (largely interviews and movement literature). These sources emphasize the importance of clandestinity, as well as the influence of New Left ideas. We then develop a concept, “political underground,” describing the importance of clandestinity and its relationship to the radical politics of its time.

Résumé

Nous retraçons la formation du Kadihine, un mouvement culturel et politique mauritanien de la fin des années 1960 et du début des années 1970, en mettant l’accent sur les aspects de la « résistance politique » au cœur des stratégies et des principes d’organisation du mouvement. Dans le cadre d’une histoire anthropologique du Kadihine, nous considérons une perspective d’organisation offerte par ses sources (principalement des entretiens et de la littérature sur le mouvement). Ces sources soulignent l’importance de la clandestinité, ainsi que l’influence des idées de la Nouvelle Gauche. Nous développons ensuite un concept, la « politique sous-terrain », décrivant l’importance de la clandestinité et sa relation avec la politique radicale de son époque.

Resumo

Neste artigo, reconstituímos o processo de formação do movimento “Kadehine”, um movimento cultural e político do final da década de 1960 e início da década de 1970, centrando-nos nas questões de “clandestinidade política”, que foram essenciais para as

estratégias e os princípios de organização do movimento. Nesta história antropológica do movimento “Kadehine”, criámos um conceito a partir das perspectivas proporcionadas pelas fontes a que recorreremos (sobretudo entrevistas e literatura do movimento). Estas fontes evidenciam a importância da clandestinidade, bem como a influência das ideias da Nova Esquerda. Desenvolvemos então o conceito de “clandestinidade política”, explicando a importância da clandestinidade e a sua relação com a política radical daquela época.

Keywords: decolonization; underground; clandestinity; nation-state; African history; Mauritania

Introduction: Who were the Kadehine?

In the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, the *Kadehine* (Ar. “toilers”) emerged in the late 1960s as a clandestine movement confronting the one-party regime of the Mauritanian People’s Party (PPM) and critiquing its continued dependency on the country’s former colonial power, France. Together with the Mouvement National Démocratique (MND) and labor unions, the Kadehine’s mobilization of students, salaried workers, women, and rural pastoralists challenged the PPM during the late 1960s and early 1970s to such an extent that the state implemented several of the Kadehine’s demands, leading to the movement’s co-optation and effective demise by 1976. Informed by Maoist and Marxist-Leninist literature, anti-colonial liberation movements from Vietnam to Palestine, and anti-imperialist ideas of social transformation, the Kadehine were shaped by and took part in the global 1960s. And yet, their ideological positions were also informed by local contexts that included the upheaval of rapid urbanization and massive drought, a rigid hierarchical social structure, and early state violence against students protesting language and, thus, identity politics.

Following independence in 1960, Mauritania faced territorial claims by neighboring Morocco, Senegal, and Mali. The country’s first president, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, signed a treaty of mutual defense with France in 1961 just as a pro-Moroccan operation killed and wounded French and Mauritanian soldiers, the third such attack in two years.¹ This early violence against the state and continuing disagreement about the linguistic and ethnic identity of the nation was used in part to justify the 1963 declaration that the Ould Daddah-led PPM would henceforth be the only permitted political party until “national unity was achieved” (Ould Daddah 2003, 329).

Mauritania simultaneously attracted geopolitical interest beyond its immediate neighbors in the Cold War context of the 1960s. Through major public works projects, including the installation of water infrastructure for the capital Nouakchott, the dredging of an industrial port, and the promotion of rice growing in the rural south, China had a particularly visible presence (Diaw 1998, 44; Ould Daddah 2003, 613; De Chassey 1978, 377). As in other West African countries, the Chinese embassy distributed free Maoist literature, which was picked up, read, and shared throughout Mauritania (Wane 2024, 7). As a contemporary of the Kadehine reminisced, “ah ... in every tent in Nouakchott, there was a *Little Red Book* by Mao Tse-Tung. Can you imagine?”² New Left and Third Worldist ideas found eager reception among coalitions of student (and instructor) activists, trade unionists, and even

secondary school pupils during this “age of anti-imperialism” (Bianchini 2016, 87). Mauriticians studying in Dakar, Paris, Algiers, Cairo, and Damascus—and traveling to Beirut and Amman—contributed to the circulation of Maoist, Marxist-Leninist, and Arab nationalist analytical frameworks, organizational forms, and tactics. The Kadehine movement emerged, then, in the context of postindependence, single-party rule—a political situation that Mauritania shared with a number of its West African neighbors—as well as the transregional “radical cosmopolitanism” of the late 1960s (Maasri 2020; Guirguis 2020; Hendrickson 2022).

The Arabic term “*kādeḥ*” (pl. *kādeḥīn*) gave both expression and cover to this popular movement. In the Arabic translation of the anthem of the international workers’ movement, the *Internationale*, the term encompasses workers and peasants alike, who “together are part of the kadehine party.”³ In referring to a dispossessed social class, *kādeḥ* effectively translated the concepts of Marxist thought to a postindependence Mauritanian society experiencing tremendous change, and gave expression to this change. At the same time, the presence of the word in *surat al-inshiqāq* in the Qur’an—(“Oh humanity, you are laboring tirelessly toward your Lord and will meet the consequences”)⁴—provided moral legitimacy for identifying as *kādeḥ* and served to counter a campaign orchestrated by Mauritanian state media and religious leaders, which labeled the movement as communist, atheist, and un-Islamic.⁵ The popular saying, “I am *kādeḥ* and you are *kādeḥ* / I’m your equal as you are mine / You are not my slave as I’m not yours,”⁶ conveys how *kādeḥ* was a matter of identification through relations of equality and free association. Defined in opposition to slavery, an institution underpinning hierarchical relations of kinship, status, property, and labor that was still prevalent in postindependence Mauritania, the *kādeḥ* was connected to a project of social transformation that sought to encompass Mauritians across linguistic and status backgrounds. In mobilizing wide swaths of society, the polysemy of “*kādeḥ*” derived from the fact that the word contains social meanings apposite to New Left movements of the time, while retaining moral and ethical connotations as well as an analytical vagueness conducive to wide-ranging self-identification. The condition which enabled these multifarious meanings, while also giving the term *kādeḥ* its hidden power, was the political underground.

This article considers the Kadehine less through a dichotomy between global networks and local context than through a framework that argues that the movement’s ethos and organizing principles constituted, and were made possible by, a “political underground.” Foregrounding the concept of the “political underground” brings mobilization conducted both in Mauritania and transnationally within the same analytical framework to ask how the limits to open political activism (state-imposed or otherwise) in a newly independent Mauritania generated alternative political spaces. By centering the oral histories, memoirs, and archives produced by former movement members, our research seeks to contribute to the resurgent local interest in a transformational cultural and political moment in Mauritania’s history and a broader academic interrogation of the archives of decolonization.⁷ To what extent was clandestinity viewed as a necessary choice, and what political possibilities emerged within and because of those constraints? What were the techniques and organizing concepts for producing and maintaining secrecy? Who were the Kadehine, and how did the movement’s “underground” complement and amplify its

more “visible” manifestations? We argue that the translation, circulation, and amplification of calls for decolonization in postindependent Mauritania depended upon a political underground. By recounting the rise and fall of the Kadehine in relation to this underground, this history also draws attention to both the possibilities and limitations of political mobilization organized around concealment, secrecy, and invisibility.

Researching the underground

The Kadehine remained clandestine and, in certain ways, illegible to state officials for several years. The movement’s secrecy undeniably poses methodological challenges for providing an exhaustive accounting of Kadehine membership, organization, and activities. Reports from the PPM congresses held in the *Fonds Mauritanie* at the *Institut français* of Nouakchott provide proof of the state’s awareness of opposition organizing. However, the National Archives of Mauritania have not been easily accessible since at least 2013, precluding a more thorough account of the state’s perception of this movement as a threat, and its efforts to subvert it.⁸ French state archives have, perhaps ironically, contained some of the most concentrated numbers of anti-imperialist tracts and periodicals produced by the Kadehine as transnational activists. French diplomats collected these materials, fretted about the movement, and analyzed events in Mauritania with a preference for their own country’s national interests and, yet, their reports and letters provide corroborating evidence for dates and events recounted in oral interviews and in published memoirs. And documents from private collections of New Left activists housed in the Nanterre archive, *La Contemporaine*, reflect the transnational relations that sustained the movements studied here.

The official multi-year and numbered publication for the movement, *Sayhat el-madhloum* (Ar. “Cry of the Oppressed”) is preserved in its entirety in the private library of an individual Mauritanian along with a good portion of internal documents and the original printed collection of revolutionary poetry from the movement, *Suṭūr ḥamrā’* (Ar. “Red Lines”). Beyond this important repository, private archives and personal collections of textual materials produced by the Kadehine are almost nonexistent. Groups of militants in Mauritania and abroad produced a flurry of short-lived newspapers with limited circulation, but we have yet to see most of them. As one former militant explained, “we didn’t keep anything for fear of being found out.”⁹ Another interlocutor recounted how she had buried papers underground for safekeeping, only to find them destroyed by termites when she went back to unearth them.¹⁰ The secrecy and silences of political clandestinity generate a “conceptual challenge of dealing with an absence” (Verdery 2014, 82), a challenge we engage with methodologically by assembling an archive of the underground (see also El Shakry 2015; Bianchini et al. 2023).

In the absence of access to the National Archives, oral interviews and memoirs have been fundamental to our current research. Over the course of several research trips (2015–25), we have been able to conduct over sixty interviews with former and current militants (both men and women) of the movement

explored in this paper. The people who lived through the repression, organization, and protest examined in this paper are rapidly aging and have increasingly been solicited as reservoirs of national memory for a short-lived and, yet, effervescent period in the political history of Mauritania. Several of those we interviewed have published memoirs focused on this period of intense political mobilization. Some have also been guests on locally produced television to discuss this period, and others have written down their memories in serial form for local newspapers. While memoirs and oral history interviews have their own limitations, they provide invaluable insight into the experiences of political activism and show us how central clandestinity was to this participation among the Kadehine and those engaged in a broader social mobilization known as the MND. The memories of former members, together with movement literature, do not form a unified account of the movement's structure, ideology, and strategies. Instead, they describe myriad practices of concealment, nested organizational forms depicted through elaborate metaphor, nocturnal activities carried out across a multiplicity of dispersed sites, and an overarching commitment to secrecy. Methodologically, in other words, these sources provide a view of the Kadehine from the only perspective through which the movement flourished: the underground.

The Kadehine/MND formed in response to the state's repression, dependence on its former colonial power, and inertia in addressing enduring social inequalities. Mauritanian society was undergoing rapid urbanization on account of industrial and state-led development and, in the latter half of the 1960s, an intensifying drought. As people abandoned livelihoods organized around livestock and agriculture, they moved to cities like Nouakchott, which at its establishment in 1957 had been little more than 500 people, but by 1972 was a rapidly growing city of 130,000 (De Chassey 1978, 403). And yet Mauritanian society, even in the nascent capital, remained predicated on familiarity and kinship. Elemine ould Mohamed Baba, who came of age in Nouakchott during the late 1960s, describes this contradictory condition of carrying out clandestine political activity "in a small country where anonymity was nonexistent and where the society takes responsibility for monitoring all of its members" (Ould Mohamed Baba 2004, 21). Given Mauritania's small population, the border guard, the police commissioner, the minister of justice could easily be—and often were—distant and not-so-distant relatives. Conversely, family and educational networks were frequently entwined and could encourage interest in and affiliation to the movement. It was not uncommon for members of the movement from the same region to be direct or indirect cousins. Schoolchildren were often exposed to the major ideological dispositions and political demands of the Kadehine through the classroom or lines of kinship. For one former militant, it was while playing at her friend's house after school that she overheard one of the movement's pivotal actors, Mohammed ould Ichiddou, discussing revolutionary politics with his friends.¹¹

The movement's clandestinity—often operating through networks of kinship and familiarity—affected everything from the Kadehine's tactics and organizational forms to the production and distribution of written material. Such clandestinity prevents the possibility of a collective or consensual memory of the movement. Two of the movement's key figures suggested in interviews that

the underground nature of the Kadehine would complicate the possibility of getting one “truth,” since individual members were not necessarily cognizant of the identity and activities of other comrades belonging to different organizational cells.¹² Constituted by a multiplicity of concealed sites, the totality of this dispersed organization remained illegible to any one member, a condition of relative invisibility which enabled the Kadehine to produce a political imaginary of amplified effects. At its height, attempts to maintain this secrecy contributed to a spectral sense that the Kadehine were everywhere and nowhere at once: a popular mobilization operating—sometimes, quite literally—underground. A core tenet for this “revolutionary and avant-garde party,” as *Sayhat el-madhloum* reminded its readers, was the need to provide “a strategy and method of scientific analysis that would allow it to really understand the realities of the society it wants to change” (*Sayhat el-madhloum* No. 11, March 1972).¹³ *Sayhat el-madhloum*’s method points to the multiple spaces, forms, and modalities of the underground that created the conditions of possibility for the Kadehine’s emergence. For the Kadehine, knowing how to look from underground was the first stage of the larger revolution.

Tokomadji—Dakar—Damascus—Paris: The transregional underground spaces of the Kadehine

French colonialism, despite its relatively limited nature when compared to other regions, left indelible marks on the social and political structures of Mauritania. Perhaps the most determinative legacy of colonial rule was the drawing of territorial borders that would come to associate several linguistic and two racial communities as citizens with differentiated experiences of education and access to power within a single nation state. Soninké, Wolof, and Halpulaar-speaking communities, living primarily in the Senegal River Valley on the southern edge of Mauritania, had been integrated earlier and more consistently into what limited colonial schooling existed. Because of their proximity to Saint-Louis in present-day Senegal which was the site of French colonial administrative and military rule for Mauritania, these Black populations had also been conscripted into the colonial army and taxed directly. Nomadic and semi-nomadic Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the Sahara who racially and ethnically defined themselves as *bīḍān* (Ar. “white”) and *ḥratīn* (Hassaniya darker skinned of presumed enslaved origin) were, for their part, less incorporated into the colonial apparatus in terms of education, taxation, the military, or administration.

Access to formal public education remained limited in the early years of Mauritanian independence, but schools were among the first sites of organized political protest and state violence.¹⁴ Debates about the ethnic and linguistic identity of Mauritania focused on language use in education and state administration. Would it be dominated by arabophone populations and, thus, oriented toward North Africa and the Middle East? Or would it maintain its inherited French political structures, language, and affiliation with West African states? Graduates of Mauritania’s autochthonous Qur’anic institutions and the colonial-established Islamic Studies Institute championed the adoption of Arabic as the

official language of Mauritania (Ould Cheikh 2022). These activists were often members of the Arabic Teachers' Union and are remembered by their students to have been engaged in political proselytization of Arab nationalism, as developed in Syria and Egypt, as a rejection of the legacies of French colonialism in the region.¹⁵ In a break with colonial education, the PPM adopted legislation in 1965 to require the preferential teaching of Arabic alongside French in middle school.

Anxious about cultural and political marginalization in what had been an officially francophone space, Black francophone students in Nouakchott and Rosso protested the imposition of Arabic in schools in early 1966. They claimed the reforms were racially preferential to Arab Mauritaniens and discriminatory toward their Black compatriots who had been overwhelmingly trained in French. Six people were killed and seventy wounded in the capital in ensuing protests. Schools were closed, the new national radio station was closely monitored, and a curfew was imposed.¹⁶ Additionally, a collective of nineteen Black professionals wrote a manifesto in support of the students, denouncing what they saw as a cultural and linguistic Arabization of Mauritania.¹⁷ After much pressure to respond forcefully, Ould Daddah accused the nineteen of manipulating the students and threatening national unity.¹⁸ The nineteen were suspended from their jobs, arrested and imprisoned, as were a dozen or so members of the Arabic Teachers' Union, accused of having stoked student frustrations and violence.¹⁹ Meanwhile, leaflets were circulated in Nouakchott calling for what was effectively apartheid—"a complete and definitive separation between the two ethnicities."²⁰

Disillusionment caused by this student activism around national identity in Mauritania, and compounded by a larger existential crisis after the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967, led a core group of Mauritanian Arab nationalists to meet in a small village called Tokomadji in early April 1968. Sitting just along the Senegal River, Tokomadji's scrubland served as a desert *maquis* for those gathered secretly to discuss their anxieties about the country's future.²¹ Inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideologies in a global context of Third World anti-imperialism and Cold War geopolitics, these young *bīḍān* men decided they would promote a more inclusive notion of Mauritanian identity than Arab nationalism had allowed.²² Already in contact with labor leaders, those who met at Tokomadji decided that to establish a movement they would extend their outreach to school children, women, and the rural poor when they returned to their places of work and study.²³

The violent repression of worker strikes at the iron ore mining site owned by the international conglomerate MIFERMA, in the northern city of Zouerate at the end of May 1968, and the dismissal of Mauritanian university students in Dakar after involvement in protests there the same month, affirmed the need for cross-sector collaboration between intellectuals, workers, and students.²⁴ Not only had the Mauritanian state killed several of those in Zouerate who had called for higher wages, better benefits, and an end to the racial discrimination in the mining sector, but it had also relied on the support of the French military to do so. As Ahmed Salem Ould Elmoutar "Cheddad" wrote in his memoirs:

The bloody repression of the workers' strike at Miferma had a direct impact on the broader situation in the country. The leaders of the racial conflicts in

February 1966 immediately reexamined their respective positions. The first lesson learned from the worker's actions was that there was strength in unity. The second was that the common enemy, if there was one, was none other than the one who had an interest in perpetuating divisions between the populations. By that, people singled out state authorities and their French supporters. (Ould Elmoctar 2017, 195–96)

Fishermen, road workers, dockers, and students, enraged by the state-sanctioned violence, united *en masse* across racial and linguistic lines for the first time to co-organize protests and strikes against the government's political repression and a relationship with France characterized as neocolonial.²⁵ Members of the Tokomadji group were imprisoned for producing and distributing a tract denouncing the state's response. Students confronted the president as he toured the country, asking him to answer for the miners' deaths. They denounced state power in plays they wrote and performed (Ould Elmoctar 2017, 196). Abdelqadr "Hamad" Mohammed Said recalled the emotional impact of watching forces of order strike students with rifle butts during a protest at his school in the southern city of Rosso.²⁶ For Hamad, Cheddad, and many others, the events at Zouerate sparked a political awakening that produced seminal moments for their subject formation as militants.

The crackdown on expressions of dissent in the country led Mauritians studying and working abroad to begin coordinating their own underground political action in Dakar, Paris, and Cairo. Unbeknownst to the Mauritanian government, twenty-some Mauritians studying in these global centers of education and politics met in Damascus in July 1968. Here, students established *l'Union Nationale des Étudiants de Mauritanie* (UNEMAU) to advocate for student interests.²⁷ A report of the meeting was sent back to Dakar for typing and printing before being transported across the Senegal River and distributed secretly among students in Mauritania (Ould Elmoctar 2017, 202). The summer of 1968 signaled the intensification and formalization of student political activism based on a specific ideology and set of tactics that could spread outside of major cities, democratize politics, and obliterate social inequality. The state's collective punishment of dissent through the imprisonment, removal, firing, and killing of activists meant that their political action needed to go abroad in order to remain underground.

Eventually, those dispersed transnationally across various sites of underground organizing—Tokomadji, Dakar, Damascus, and Paris, among other locations—would converge on the capital city of Nouakchott. Upon their return, they would find younger high school and elementary school students clandestinely assembling, reading, discussing, and organizing throughout Mauritania.

Nouakchott at a boil

The formation of the *Comité Provisoire d'Action Scolaire Secondaire* (CPASS) gave organized, if clandestine, form within Mauritania to the spirit of protest that emerged after Zouerate. At the beginning of 1969, CPASS cells generated a

widespread base of dissent organized through the *lycées*, or high schools, which were increasingly capable of bringing the education system to a standstill through strikes. Unlike the UNEMAU, this student movement was based entirely within Mauritania. When schools closed, whether for a regularly scheduled vacation or because of strikes, students would return home to their families—often a trip of considerable distance considering the small number of high schools throughout the country at the time. As one founding member of CPASS claimed, at each stop on their route home students would shout, “Down with the Ould Daddah regime, Dependent upon colonialism!”²⁸ CPASS played a prominent role not only in making the *lycée* a center of agitation against Ould Daddah’s regime, but also in making this kind of opposition audible beyond school walls.

While CPASS flourished under the tutelage of the Tokomadji group within Mauritania, university students abroad developed their own critiques of a regime increasingly considered neocolonial and comprador in its dependence upon France. If the Syrian Ba’athist regime’s sponsorship allowed for the formation of UNEMAU to take place in Damascus in 1968, France remained a hub for Mauritanian students abroad.²⁹ One of the more influential, politically active collectives was known as *Le Groupe de Toulouse*, named after the French university town where many activists had been studying. Influenced by the events of May ’68 in Paris, as well as the rise of the militant Palestinian liberation fronts that emerged following the Six Days War in 1967, these student activists developed an analysis of Mauritania’s situation that was informed by reading Lenin and Mao, among others. Their engagement with Marxism—part of a decisive shift for some *bīḍān* who had been committed Arab nationalists just a few years earlier—allowed them to identify the primary contradiction facing Mauritania not as a matter of overcoming Arab disunity, nor as one of class, but as a struggle against “feudalism,” meaning the hegemony of inherited social status.³⁰ In keeping with the student-worker organizing that was common to Leftist movements emerging from May ’68, members of the group reached out to Mauritanian workers in France across racial, linguistic, and ethnic divides (Ould Beyyah 2017, 90). Their organizing and activism was also directed against Ould Daddah’s regime:

The Mauritanian student movement became active during this period, meeting almost daily. On the occasion of 28 November (marking Mauritania’s independence in 1960), the students decided to distribute pamphlets criticizing the regime during a party that the embassy invited us to at a hotel. I remember some of the women [at the party] quickly stuffed the pamphlets in their bags and began asking questions about them, so I advised them to read it. (Ould Beyyah 2017, 91)

Those organizing in Mauritania encountered an increasingly restrictive political climate, particularly following the restive fallout of the Zouerate “massacre,” as it became known. Ndiawar Kane, then a member of the leading Mauritanian union of non-arabophone students, *L’Association des Etudiants et Stagiaires Mauritanians* (AESM), noted a marked difference in the political climate when he and

other students were expelled from the University of Dakar for their political activism and, in his case, made to return to Nouakchott in 1969:

from the time we arrived at the Nouakchott airport, we were subject to very close searches. ... From then on, the student movements were considered a part of the radical opposition to the government. An arduous struggle against any protest movement seemed to be the new orientation of the regime. (Kane 2023, 65)

Kane's observation reflected the state's recognition that the protests following Zouerate had grown more organized: although opposition political parties were illegal, students, state employees pushing for an independent union, and activists including the Tokomadj group had formed a broad coalition known as the MND (Badr al-Din and Sow n.d., 5). The ruling PPM had grand plans for promoting national unity through the "repersonalization" of a "New Mauritanian Man," as part of a platform for achieving "cultural independence" that had been first announced at a party congress in 1968 (De Chassey 1978, 410; Fonds Mauritanie, Document #026085, 9). Instead, the regime increasingly faced accusations of perpetuating neocolonial social and political relations. In response, Ould Dad-dah's regime attempted to discredit members of the MND through PPM party meetings, radio programs, and mosque sermons claiming the movement was atheist, communist, and therefore incompatible with a society where "capitalism and socialism are both strangers to our country" (De Chassey 1978, 410).³¹

On January 7, 1970, Sidi Mohammed Ould Soumeyda' died from complications of an undiagnosed condition at the young age of twenty-four. Soumeyda' attended the conference in Damascus that led to the formation of UNEMAU, and he advised and contributed to the formation of CPASS by organizing students in Rosso. He also organized demonstrations, both in Nouadhibou leading up to the Zouerate massacre, and in Nouakchott in the event's aftermath. He took advantage of his time at the University of Dakar to organize and mobilize resources at the university—specifically, printing materials—to avoid Mauritanian state surveillance, a technique the Kadehine continued to utilize to print clandestine materials abroad before smuggling them across the Senegal River for distribution throughout Mauritania.³²

That spring, *Le Groupe de Toulouse* wrapped up their studies in France and returned to Nouakchott. The convergence of university students on Nouakchott allowed for further coordination between two organizations: AESM, founded in 1961 and which historically represented Halpulaar, Soninké, and Wolof-speaking students; and UNEMAU, established by a diaspora of *bīḍān* students in 1968. Having been involved in or exposed to party organization, mass strikes, and militant activism in Dakar, Paris, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Amman, and elsewhere, this cohort brought a range of Leftist political dispositions and ideological commitments which largely transcended the language- and identity-based schisms that had defined political life in Mauritania in the mid-1960s. Members of this cohort might be considered "militant intellectuals" in the sense defined by Fadi Bardawil, fluent in the idiom and concepts of revolutionary politics

of the Left (Bardawil 2020, 15), if the Left were defined not by a single affiliation or doctrinal commitment, but as “a transregional and even transnational, though diversified, universe of meaning and values, a dynamically constructed universe of shared references” (Guirguis 2020, 7).

At the beginning of August 1970, students met over the course of three days. Moving daily from one location to the next in order to remain undetected by the state, the gathering of roughly forty students eventually came to an agreement. In a building hidden “between two dunes” on the northwestern outskirts of Nouakchott, attendees formed the *Union Générale des Étudiants et Stagiaires Mauritaniens* (UGESM) and elected a student from the University of Dakar to serve as president.³³ With representatives of AESM, UNEMAU, *Le Groupe de Toulouse*, and CPASS present, UGESM established a unified student organization that cut across linguistic and racial differences.

Early the next year, a professors’ strike and the expulsion of foreign students at the University of Dakar ensured a “prolonged vacation,” enabling students from the different organizations to further organize and plan together in Nouakchott. With CPASS mobilizing define [high school students] in Mauritania, and an ongoing struggle among state employees to establish an independent union (known as *l’Union de Travailleurs Mauritanien-Renovée*, or *UTM-Renovée*), the country’s capital city was animated by political activism. A young member of CPASS who had been at school in Nouakchott for several years marveled at the energy brought about by the influx of university students: “this capital, it was about to boil then, in a manner that was extraordinary and remarkable in [my] life.”³⁴

The students’ convergence on the rapidly growing capital coincided with the first anniversary of Soumeyda’s death, an occasion marked by a day of commemoration and speeches in Nouakchott for a burgeoning movement mourning the loss of one of its leading figures.³⁵ Nevertheless, the festivities were met with repression and with the arrest of at least fifteen individuals, including the leadership of UTM-Renovée, in contravention of state law (Ould Daddah 2003, 387). Schools were closed and *lycéens* were bussed out of Nouakchott to their families across the country. News of the repression and arrests drew protests from university students in Dakar and Algiers.³⁶ A month later, the anti-imperialist defiance was directed toward French President Georges Pompidou, who was embarking on a tour of West Africa. The *New York Times* (1971) noted that “As he was driving into the capital of Mauritania, someone threw an egg at him.” One memoirist remembers the distinct atmosphere in the capital city during this time:

It was the time of the Kadihine’s contestation, this youth that had made the beautiful days of bringing Nouakchott to a boil. There seemed to be an inexorable movement to the phenomenon and in each family there was a partisan or a sympathizer to the cause. It was a time of militancy and revolutionary action. Anyone who was not pro-Kadihine experienced a certain *mal de vivre*.... (Ould Mohammed Baba 2004, 18)

The “boiling” upheaval of early 1971 manifested in the form of newly unified organizations, graffiti writing, and endless nights of discussing political tactics

and theory, and it indexed the burgeoning growth and temerity of the MND and Kadehine, as well as broader social transformation across Mauritania (Ould Mohamed Baba 2004, 29).

This mobilization had broadly coalesced around the banner of the MND and the term *kādeh*. By the early 1970s, the movement developed a critique that identified neocolonialism and the Ould Daddah regime, and not a specific social class within Mauritania, as its foes. The movement's demands included a withdrawal from the Treaty of Mutual Defense and Cooperation with France, signed in 1961, and the nationalization of the multinational mining entity, MIFERMA.³⁷ Mustafa Ould Badr al-Din summarized the movement's priorities accordingly:

Neocolonialism was our principle concern. This movement ... had four aims. The first was ending/cleansing [*tasfiyāt*] neocolonialism. The second was uniting the Mauritanian people—Arabs and Blacks. The third was to fight against the phenomenon of feudalism—slavery, oppression of women, and more. And a just redistribution of land. The fourth aim was to build an independent state of sufficient sovereignty. Those were our aims. (Mustafa Ould Badr al-Din, Interview 2, Nouakchott, April 4, 2015)

Strikes resumed in August 1971 among workers, while other underground Kadehine tactics (writing slogans on walls, distributing pamphlets and publications, composing and reciting poetry, organizing reading groups) continued unabated.

In early 1972, after months of discussion regarding organization and tactics, the *Comité d'Action Révolutionnaire Locale* (CARL) was formed. This group brought together several major streams of activism and leadership groups. CPASS, the women's movement, Tokomadji, Toulouse, and UTM-Renovée now had a representative in a single, covert political committee, which was based in Nouakchott and authorized to issue statements in the name of the MND.³⁸ While protest and organization continued throughout the country, Nouakchott increasingly became a center for organization and decision-making, as well as the principal site for confrontations between protestors and the state (Ould Elmoctar 2017, 239).

The city was also growing at an astronomical rate, driven both by state-led urbanization and by a severe, years-long drought.³⁹ An April 1973 issue of *Sayhat el-madhloum* lamented:

The reign of famine has extended its somber veil over all of Mauritania. A terrible famine, unprecedented in the history of this people: livestock decimated, no more water, no more harvest, no more food, diseases ravage everywhere...! (*Sayhat el-madhloum* No. 24, 1973, 3)⁴⁰

Many of those recent arrivals to the capital city, having lost their agricultural, pastoral, and sometimes nomadic way of life, became prime audience for a movement concerned with the dispossessed and with the Maoist concept of "serving the people."

In light of these regional developments, it is perhaps not surprising that the Ould Daddah regime responded aggressively to the MND/Kadehine's growing organization, popularity, and influence. On the one hand, the government fulfilled some of their demands: in June 1972, the country withdrew from the CFA monetary community and established a new national currency, the *ouguiya*. By the beginning of 1973, Ould Daddah announced the country's withdrawal from the Treaty of Mutual Defense and Cooperation with France. On the other hand, the government initiated a politics of repression: UTM-Renové leadership was arrested, as were a number of the more prominent members of MND/Kadehine. It was also at this stage that the state intensified its vast PR campaign on the radio and in mosques against the MND/Kadehine (De Chassey 1978, 410). While UGESM conducted a strike in the summer of 1973, along with a miner's strike in the north of the country, the state began arresting protesters *en masse*. This politics of repression led to a burgeoning population of MND/Kadehine activist prisoners. Many of them were housed in a single, colonial era fort-cum-prison in Nouakchott, known as Beyla.⁴¹

Decimated by arrests and state repression in the cities, the movement adopted a new, decentralized approach in the summer of 1973. Known as *tactique de juillet* for the month of discussions through which this tactic was formulated, militants were directed to move to the countryside and create bases of operation there. From what little we know, *tactique de juillet* was not apparently applied for long enough, or with substantial numbers of militants involved, to have a lasting impact on the trajectory of the political movement. As such, it remains one of the more obscure episodes of the Kadehine's effort to decolonize Mauritania. Was this a turn away from confrontations with the state in order to educate "the masses"? Was it a step toward preparing for guerrilla war? Given the intense repression that MND/Kadehine faced starting in 1972, the mass imprisonment of many of its members, and its turn to the countryside with *tactique de juillet*, it would be tempting to say that the movement went underground. Except that, since its emergence in 1968, the movement had always been operating beneath the surface, or underground, through clandestine tactics, organizational forms and means of producing and distributing written material. The underground gave the Kadehine a spectral quality: seemingly pervasive but apparently hidden. What was happening in 1972 was not unlike what Taussig describes in regards to the public secret: "[t]his reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth" (1999, 6). Like a metaphorical pot reaching a boil, parts of the movement had become more visible so that others might "remain depth."

Sayhat el-Madhloum and the "reflexes of clandestinity"

The capaciousness of the term and the popular orientation of the MND meant that anyone could identify as *kādeh*. Yet this openness contrasted with the secrecy of the movement and, more specifically, the positionality of Kadehine as a vanguardist cadre existing within the MND. Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, a fellow-traveler in some of their reading groups, suggested that the Kadehine served as the MND's "spine":

Without being able to delimit the precise date of birth, a nucleus defined itself as an "avant garde Marxist-Leninist party—le Parti des Kadihin de

Mauritanie (PKM)—which appeared as the hidden vertebral column of MND. The clandestinity, related to a vigorous repression on the part of the Mauritanian authorities, contributed to the envelopment of a thick shadow of mystery, broad swaths of which remain today, the governing bodies and the interior life of the PKM. (Ould Cheikh 2022, 162)

Most interlocutors emphasized the movement's clandestinity, both as a necessary outcome of its illegality but also an organizing framework that “enabled it to appear when and where it wanted” (Kane 2023, 71).⁴² While interlocutors used different spatial metaphors to describe this nested, yet disaggregated, organization, Ndiawar Kane asserted that the form served a strategic purpose:

One of the movement's strategies consisted of an organization of concentric circles. The core leadership was anonymous to the vast majority; while the people least implicated in the clandestine structures were destined to act openly. In this way the majority of militants didn't know who belonged to which level of the circles. A number of comrades had acquired the reflexes of clandestinity so well that even banal aspects of everyday life retained a certain opaqueness. (Kane 2023, 71)

Clandestine organization was deemed necessary by an outlawed political movement that prevailed under an antagonistic one-party state. The Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Vladimir Lenin's statements on clandestinity were used to justify and emphasize the centrality of subversion for the MND and Kadehine.⁴³ One internal document argued for complete clandestinity that “only includes the active, totally reliable units of the avant-garde who are capable of sustaining a very long and tortuous struggle.”⁴⁴ Continuing, the writers instruct subversive actors to make sure meetings are “well-prepared, spaced-out, and short” and that any textual materials produced are “limited and well-protected.”⁴⁵

As militants moved around the country to disseminate news and instructions, to organize meetings, and to stage educational campaigns against illiteracy and enslavement, they would sometimes travel in disguise, dressing up as a humble camel driver or marabout (a Sufi preacher), teaching village children the Qur'an, or appearing to provide protective amulets to disciples.⁴⁶ At night, militant women were known to have dressed as men to lead others to nocturnal meetings.⁴⁷ They were also known to hide objects and texts in their veiled hair, under their *melehfa* (full body veil), and in their underwear.⁴⁸ Others crept out of their homes after dark to paint revolutionary messages and demands on city and town walls. Sympathetic mothers would stash MND and Kadehine paraphernalia in their homes and smuggle it into jails when visiting their imprisoned children.⁴⁹ The deeply underground *tâches spéciales* infiltrated the national army, sending its agents for military training in Algeria before they served as officers in the military.⁵⁰ Several of those who made up the movement's “vertebral column” assumed pseudonyms to hide their true identity in poetry and in written and oral communication between members.⁵¹ Others, such as the state public works employee Deffa Bakary, used their administrative positions as cover to spread

the Kadehine message to laborers and students in the country's interior.⁵² Kane suggests that practices of concealment and infiltration produced lasting "reflexes of clandestinity" among the Kadehine's members.

The official mouthpiece of the movement, *Sayhat el-madhloum*, not only exemplified but also determined the strategies of subversion that the movement implemented. Inspired by Lenin's *Pravda* (1912–), *Sayhat el-madhloum* (see Figure 1) was published from 1971 to 1975 as an illegal monthly newspaper whose tagline instructed its readers to "Read, Discuss, Distribute, Support, Defend." The

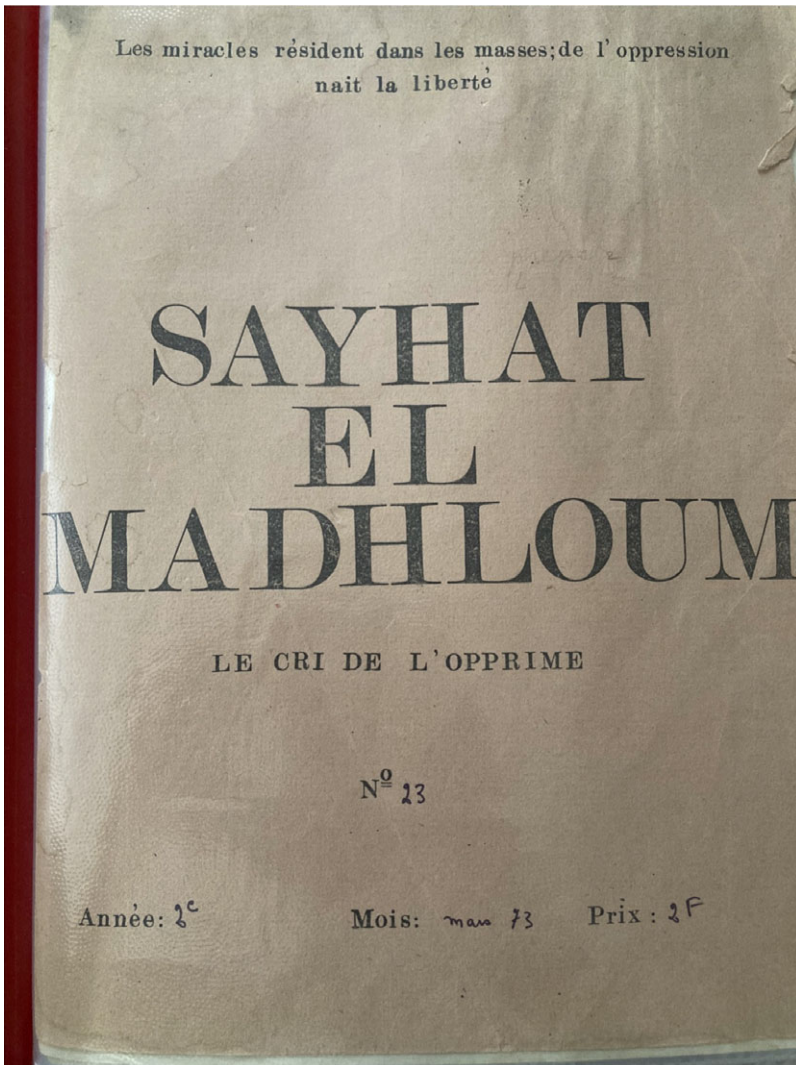


Figure 1. *Sayhat el-Madhloum* No. 23, March 1973. AMJJ Archives.

content ranged from a reiteration of movement goals to lists of local incidents related to protests, police violence, arrests, the famine, and drought, to self-criticism of the editorial work of the journal itself.⁵³ As former militant Sedenaould Yahya articulated, *Sayhat el-madhloum* was “a crucial instrument of mobilization” for the movement.⁵⁴ Many other smaller publications appeared and disappeared, produced by university students abroad, by members of the Arabic and French teachers’ unions, and by primary and secondary school students in their respective towns.⁵⁵ The editors of *Sayhat el-madhloum*, while cheering on these local publications, championed *Sayhat el-madhloum* as “a political advisor at the national level” for the disparate and often disconnected militants dispersed throughout the country (*Sayhat el-madhloum* No. 13, 1972). According to the newspaper’s editors, it was *Sayhat el-madhloum* that could provide ideological coherence, a common language, and a clear path forward for “the worker from the North, for example, to know the struggles of the peasants of the South, the heroic struggles of students [*élèves, étudiants*] and the poor.” This work of political and community organizing through the pages of the newspaper could “generate a spirit of solidarity, mutual encouragement and the exchange of experiences” and sustain the larger project of revolutionary political and social change” (*Sayhat el-madhloum* No. 13, 1972).

The absence of freedom of the press in a single-party state meant that the newspaper’s editorial team and subscribers took great pains to develop and enact subversive production, distribution, and reading practices. Even the choice of location for the typesetting of the newspaper’s first issue reflects this sense of forced transgression: the first copy-editor transcribed the inaugural issue from the minaret of the capital’s central mosque, anticipating that no one would think to monitor the mosque for Kadehine activity.⁵⁶ He elaborated that the *Sayhat el-madhloum* editorial team later took to writing in what were then open, unsettled areas behind the presidential palace, burying their typewriter among watermelon patches and wandering goats during the day. Working at night, they used black fabric to create a tent to obscure their work while others watched for approaching people who might foil their labor. As he elaborated, “our lookouts would flash green or red lights—if the lights blinked red, we knew we had to burn the material.” When state surveillance was especially relentless, the newspaper’s production was transferred to Senegal.

A letter to the editor from a laborer at Miferma in Zouerate began with the writer surprising a friend who was reading *Sayhat al-madhloum*, hiding its pages between his chest and jacket. “Be careful,” his friend warned, “it’s clando.” “What does ‘clando’ mean?” responds the writer. “Forbidden by the government.” The friend continues that any contact with the newspaper should be done secretly because “in a country where they kill you for raising your hand, secrecy should surround everything.” (*Sayhat el-madhloum* No. 10, 1972). Ndiawar Kane explained that the lack of an independent press can, in part, explain the importance attributed to the newspaper by the movement’s members. “The publication passed from hand to hand without the many intelligence officers recruited throughout the country having the smallest idea of its circulation” (Kane 2023, 71).

The experience of one young *kādeh* illustrates the lengths undertaken to clandestinely produce and distribute written material throughout the country. Sedena ould Yahya was tasked with crossing the Senegal River to pick up two large suitcases that had been delivered in the name of a fellow *kādeh* then living in the riverine town of Richard Toll. Their distribution was time sensitive as it was a day or two before the arrival of Georges Pompidou, and the suitcases contained leaflets denouncing the French president and his pending arrival. Over the span of 72 hours, Ould Yahya traveled from Richard Toll in the morning to Rosso on the Mauritanian side of the river, and then to the northern mining city of Zouerate via the capital, Nouakchott, and the port city of Nouadhibou. With some biscuits, a bottle of water, and his precious cargo, and dodging gendarmes en route, Ould Yahya relied upon a network of *kādehine* for the distribution of anti-imperial leaflets to every major city across nearly 400,000 square miles of land.

Two years later, Sedena ould Yahya would be responsible for a publishing center established by the Kadehine in Nouadhibou. Every evening, after finishing his day job at a travel agency, Ould Yahya worked at night printing materials with a mimeograph. A comrade at ground level would make tea, keeping a lookout while Ould Yahya printed materials from below ground, where a hole had been dug at the center of the simple structure in which they worked. By the light of an oil lamp, the discourse to decolonize Mauritania emerged from underground.⁵⁷

The underground: A political imaginary of amplified effects

On October 1, 1973, the *Parti des Kadehines Mauritaniens* (PKM) was officially announced. Many of its militants were imprisoned at the time. Yet the decentralized, clandestine nature of the organization “showed” itself by printing and distributing the official announcement throughout much of the country.⁵⁸ A triumph in many respects, the emergence of the Kadehine out of the shadows of clandestinity was also the beginning of its end. The realities of maintaining an underground movement meant that many of its members never openly or directly communicated with each other. Within months of the announcement, differences emerged within the PKM around the question of reconciling with Ould Daddah’s regime.⁵⁹ The option became more pressing when the Mauritanian state met another of the movement’s demands by nationalizing MIFERMA, the multinational mining concern, in November 1974. By 1975, ongoing debate within the movement ended when fifteen leading PKM members signed an agreement to join the ruling PPM government. This co-optation effectively marked the end of the Kadehine movement, even if debate would continue into the following year about how to manage the PKM’s “crisis.”⁶⁰ Surfacing above ground to join a government that had seemingly yielded to Kadehine demands and promised an airing out of tensions had the contradictory effect of suffocating the movement.

Indeed, anthropologist David Nugent has argued that we have much to learn about state formation during such moments of crisis, when oppositional political

activity goes underground and authoritarian governments desperately try to “see” what has effectively become invisible (Nugent 2010). “Whoever succeeds in controlling secrecy,” he writes, “has the ability to define social order” (699). For a while, at least it seemed, the Kadehine controlled what was knowable about their political capabilities. The complex organizational structure allowed some members to remain covert, while others were widely recognized for their role in the movement. In Nugent’s words, “The party was in a position to imply much and to state little” (2010, 699). In a broader West African Saharan culture already constituted by multiple layers of discretion and intergenerational *non-dits* around sexuality, social order, and social conduct, young Mauritians were used to hiding their behavior from their elders. The discretion expected of a younger generation combined with the organizational forms and tactics of the transnational New Left to produce an underground movement predicated on the “reflexes of clandestinity.” Although the Kadehine’s invisibility produced a political imaginary of amplified effects, there had been hope that the movement could play a role in shaping Mauritania’s political future with the end of formal colonialism. Instead, their project for social transformation fractured as it emerged into the public sphere. Bianchini et al. have identified a historical pattern, which the Kadehine undoubtedly reflected, among a dynamic and, simultaneously, ephemeral “revolutionary African left” that ultimately “failed to become hegemonic within the institutionalised political arena” (2024, 16).

Alternative imagined futures were seen as destabilizing to a nascent nation-state. In a now well-known pattern of postcolonial governance in Africa, leaders often sought to cultivate social cohesion or national unity, imagined as crucial to the construction of a state, through a cult of personality, the imposition of a single language, and the promotion of a single party state. When the Ould Daddah government made it clear there were limits to open political activism, clandestinity was viewed as a necessary choice. New forms of political activity and cultural expression were generated as a result. Nocturnal graffiti throw-ups, poetry composed in innovative new forms and recited throughout the country, lullabies lamenting state violence and persistent social inequality, veils used to hide tracts, disguises used to distribute them, members infiltrating the army, small groups meeting to read and discuss a Marxist-Leninist canon, educational campaigns in rural areas, and newspapers typed and printed by cover of night and mosque constituted an emergent political underground in Mauritania that led to collaboration across language, status, and gender divides.

Mauritanian political history in the following two decades is one of even more intense oppression beginning with a *coup d’état* that overthrew Mokhtar Ould Daddah in 1978. Mauritania has since been led primarily by military men who openly ruled through authoritarian means. Many active militants went into exile or continued to operate underground as part of a renewed MND and in opposition to the government-sanctioned violence.⁶¹ It was only in 1991, under international pressure, that the government undertook a democratization process, allowing political parties and a free press for the first time. Many members of the MND joined the new *Union des Forces Progressives* (UFP), led by Mokhtar Ould Daddah’s half-brother, Ahmed, and came out of clandestinity for the first time.

As Nugent notes, the struggle over sovereignty and state formation is often also a struggle “between the visible and the invisible” (2010, 698; see also Taussig 1999; Verdery 2014). Despite regime efforts to repress, infiltrate, or co-opt the Kadehine, the movement produced novel forms of organization, expressions of citizenship, and cultural aesthetics. The Kadehine generated spaces where, as Fatoumata Seck has argued in relation to African decolonization more broadly, “alternative forms of social and political organizations have been imagined and sometimes enacted” (Seck 2023, 11). Likewise, the legacies and traces of the Kadehine constitute a counterpoint to the prevailing Mauritanian postcolonial political history of military rule and racialized ethnic conflict. The newspapers, memoirs, poems, slogans, rumors, stories, and memories which provide the basis for the movement’s history outlined here resonate with what scholars of Middle Eastern and African decolonization have conceptualized as a “history without documents,” an “archive of citizen-making,” or an “other-archive” with legacies that continue to shape the history of the present (Seck 2023, 5; El Guabli 2023; El Shakry 2015).

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Notes

1. In November 1960 an attempted attack against a French officer in Kiffa was thwarted, while the deputy mayor of Atar was killed in Nouakchott. Three Mauritians were arrested and executed for an attack in Nema in August, 1961 (Ould Cheikh 2022).
2. Anonymous 1, Interview, Nouakchott, March 17, 2015. De Chassey (1978, 377).
3. <https://www.marxists.org/arabic/admin/internationale.htm>. Thanks to Nour MJ Hodeib.
4. يابها الإنسان إنك كادح إلى ربك كدحا فملاقيه.

5. On translation and the universality of Marxism, see Bardawil (2020, 15, 73). Leadership stopped using the term “communist” to describe the movement as it troubled many would-be members. Today, most sources deny any history of atheism among the activists.
6. *Anā kādeḥ w’anta kādeḥ / anā gidek w’anta giddī / manek ‘abdī wa manī ‘abdek*. Mohamed Mahjoubould Beyyah, personal communication, February 18, 2024.
7. Two Mauritanian historians are currently beginning to cowrite their own history of the movement.
8. The National Archives of Mauritania remain closed to the public in 2025, as they move to another location. The archives director, Muḥammad al-Mukhtār wuld Sīdī Muḥammad al-Hādī, used documents from its holdings in his monograph on the period’s politics. See his *al-Raḥīl ilā al-dawla: dirāṣah fī tārikh al-mujtama’ wa al-sulṭa fī mūrītānyā (1978–1961)* (2020) and Sīdī A’mar wuld Shaykhnā (2009).
9. Aziza Didi mint al-Meslim, Interview, Nouakchott, October 25, 2023.
10. Nancy Jones, Interview, Nouakchott, January 20, 2024.
11. Mint al-Meslim.
12. Moustafaould Badr ad-Din, Interview 1, Nouakchott, January 21, 2020 and Mohammedould Moloud, Interview, Nouakchott, June 15, 2022.
13. Given the widespread influence of Maoist literature on newspaper editors, this statement likely draws upon one of Mao’s precepts “To Investigate a Problem Is to Solve It.” https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6_11.htm. Thanks to Fatoumata Seck for this reference.
14. Only primary and secondary schools existed in Mauritania until 1981, when the University of Nouakchott was established.
15. Mohammed Abdallahi Belil, Interview, Nouakchott, January 20, 2020. Syrian Ba’athism and Egyptian Nasserism were the two most claimed ideological currents among Mauritanian Arab Nationalists. Mohamed Mahjoubould Beyyah, Interview 1, Nouakchott, October 19, 2023 and short bios of several members of this generation in the edited version of *Suṭūr ḥamrā’* (Belil 2021).
16. Ould Daddah (2003, 343–44); Kane (2023, 51–53); *Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes* (CADN), Nouakchott (ambassade), 488PO/B/35 Synthèses, n. 6/66 du 11 février 1966.
17. CADN, 488PO/B/35 Synthèses, Affaires intérieures, Synthèse n. 1/66 du 7 janvier 1966.
18. Ould Daddah (2003, 340–41). Some in the *biḍān* community felt Ould Daddah had severely punished those involved in pro-Moroccan political acts and had been slow to act similarly with the anti-Arabization activists. CADN, 488PO/B/35 Synthèses, n. 2/66 du 16 janvier 1966.
19. CADN 488PO/B/35 Synthèses, n. 7/66 du 18 février 1966 and Synthèse n. 12 du 25 mars 1966. French and Arabic teachers’ unions, often racialized, and labor unions served as embryos of political activity. Mohammedenould Bagga, Interview, Nouakchott, October 23, 2023. See also Bonis (1973, 21–50).
20. CADN 488PO/B/35 Synthèses, n. 5/66 du 4 février 1966. A French diplomat blamed Marxist and unionist ideologies for the divisiveness and lamented Ould Daddah’s public denial of the relevance of racial categories in the civil unrest. CADN 488PO/B/35 Synthèses n. 12 du 25 mars 1966.
21. For more on the concept of the *maquis* as a place of dense vegetation used for clandestine political organization, see “Définition de Maquis,” *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales*, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/maquis> and Mbembe (2001).
22. Ould Beyyah, Interview 1.
23. Ould Ichiddou (2020, 64) writes of a “historic meeting” in 1966 between Arab nationalists and labor unions.
24. Collectively known as *élèves* in French or *telāmīd* in Arabic, primary and secondary school students are distinguished in both languages from university students, or *étudiants* and *ṭullāb*. For more on Dakar, see Gueye (2017) and Bianchini (2021).
25. Mohammedould Moloud, Interview. See also De Chassey (1978, 397) and Ould Elmoctar (2017, 195).
26. Abdelqadr Mohammed Said, Interview 1, Nouakchott, April 16, 2015.
27. Ould Beyyah, Interview 1. See also Ould Beyyah (2017, 65–87).
28. Mohammedould Moloud, Interview.
29. Out of 312 Mauritanian students on scholarship studying abroad in 1969, 101 of them were in France. CADN: Fiche n. V4, Avril 1969, Recensement 1968 des boursiers mauritaniens à l’étranger.
30. Mustafaould Abeid al-Rahman, Interview, Nouakchott, March 30, 2015.
31. Abdelqadr Mohammed Said, Interview 2, Nouakchott, June 7, 2022.

32. News from the congress in Damascus was transported across the Senegal River by Mohamed Abdellahi ould Zayn studying in Dakar in order to avoid seizure by customs agents. Ould Elmoctar (2017, 202).
33. Ould Beyyah (2017, 112–13) and Mohammed Mahjoub Ould Beyyah, Interview 2, Nouakchott, April 23, 2015.
34. Mohammed ould Moloud, Interview, Nouakchott, June 15, 2022.
35. Sedena ould Yahya, Interview, Nouakchott, December 17, 2022.
36. Mohammed ould Mouloud, Interview. See also a series of interviews with Ould Moloud: “Raïs mohammed ould moloud, j. 1,” *Qanat al-barlamania*, YouTube, Streamed live on June 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbvujV94u0>.
37. A multinational entity established in 1952, MIFERMA began mining iron ore near Zouerate in 1963. The Mauritanian state had been granted a 5 percent stake based on an agreement negotiated in 1959, before independence. By the end of the 1960s, the royalties from this minority stake accounted for one-third of the state’s budget (Bennoune 1978, 42–44). For more on MIFERMA see Bonte (2001).
38. Ould Moloud, Interview. See also “Raïs mohammed ould moloud, j. 1,” *Qanat al-barlamania*, YouTube.
39. De Chassey (1978, 402–403) estimated that by the end of 1972, 90 percent of the herds in northern regions had died, and that cultivation of millet and sorghum, primarily in the south, produced a fifth of its normal annual yield.
40. Archive of Ahmed “Jemal” ould Mahmoud Mohammed (AJMM).
41. “Mauritanie: Bilan de 15 ans de néo-colonialisme,” 13. ARCH 0284/3 Hélène Herrmann-Auclair, La Contemporaine, Nanterre, France.
42. Several interlocutors mentioned how the disaggregated organizational form of MND/Kadehine purposefully maintained secrecy and anonymity between groups, “sections” or “cells,” while a vanguard group remained fully underground.
43. See the document “À propos de la crise que connaît notre parti”, AMMJ Archives.
44. “Bref exposé de notre tactique dans la période actuelle,” 17, AMMJ Archives.
45. “Bref exposé.”
46. Khalilou ould Dede, Interview, Nouakchott, October 20, 2023 and Mint al-Meslim.
47. Khalilou ould Dede, Interview, Nouakchott, 20 October 2023 and Mint al-Meslim. Mohammed Fall ould Bellal, Interview, Nouakchott, January 21, 2024; and Yousseuf Diagana, Interview, Nouakchott, January 10, 2025.
48. Khadija mint Abdelqader, Interview, Nouakchott, January 15, 2020 and Sy Asimou, Interview, Paris, June 10, 2024. See also Lesourd (2007, 333–48). Demba “Isselmou” Fall, Interview, Nouakchott, October 24, 2023 and January 19, 2024.
49. As Zekeria ould Ahmed Salem has shown, mothers composed and sang lullabies reflecting on political conditions and imagining a democratic future in “Le prétexte de la berceuse: femmes, poésie populaire et subversion politique en mauritanie,” (Salem 1995, 771–89).
50. Demba “Isselmou” Fall, Interview, Nouakchott, October 24, 2023 and January 19, 2024.
51. Khadija mint Abdelqader, Interview, Nouakchott, January 15, 2020; Ould Elmoctar (2017, 239); Belil (2021).
52. Part of the movement’s adaptation of Maoist ideology, self-criticism is often evoked in militant documents. See *Sayhat el-madhloum*, No. 13, May 1972.
53. See letter n. 03/C.F/D.A from the prefect of Atar to the Ministry of the Interior where he complains about Bakary, January 27, 1971. Shared by Ahmed Mahmoud ould Mohamed.
54. Ould Yahya, Interview, Paris, October 30, 2023.
55. *Sayhat el-madhloum* listed at least fifteen other publications throughout the country. *Sayhat el-madhloum*, n. 7, November 1971.
56. Anonymous 2, Interview, Nouakchott.
57. Sedena ould Yahya, Interview, Nouakchott, December 17, 2022 and January 22, 2024.
58. Braham Ebety, Interview, Nouakchott, 22 December 2022.
59. Ould Moloud, Interview and Nancy Jones, Interview, Nouakchott, January 8, 2025.

- 60. See “À propos de la crise que connaît notre parti.”
- 61. For more on the 1989–91 violence, see N'Diaye (2013).
- 62. Ould Elmoctar (2017, 202).

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